UNITED
NATIONS

DP

Governing Council
of the
United Nations
Development Programme

Distr.
GENERAL

DP/1992/46
27 March 1992

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Thirty-ninth session
4-29 May 1992, Geneva
Item 5 of the provisional agenda

PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION

The programme approach

Report of the Administrator

SUMMARY

The term "programme approach" figured prominently in General Assembly resolution 44/211 and in the subsequent debates of UNDP and other organizations. However, no clear definition of the term was available.

During 1991, UNDP attempted to arrive at a common understanding of the programme approach. In-house discussions were supplemented by two workshops, in Santiago, Chile and Geneva, Switzerland. Recipient and donor Governments as well as United Nations specialized agencies were included in the Geneva workshop.

Crucial to an understanding of the programme approach are first, that the programme referred to is a national programme and second, that the approach referred to is the way in which national authorities attempt to achieve a national objective; not through a series of discrete or ad hoc projects, but through a carefully thought-out, articulated programme.

External cooperation has to support national programmes. This may include helping to define or formulate a programme itself as well as to manage, implement or evaluate it. A national programme framework also serves as a framework for the coordination of different external cooperation, both technical and financial.

92-14627 3080h (E) 160492 200492

/...

Within the programme approach, the comparative advantages of UNDP, stemming from the political and sectoral neutrality and universality of its mandate, appear to lie in upstream areas such as policy and programme formulation and management. Furthermore, by underlining the national origin of and commitment to a programme, the programme approach requires in effect that the programme should be nationally managed or executed, including any externally supported components.

The programme approach is not a new concept. However, if it is followed more rigorously in future, it should contribute to greater impact on human development and the more effective use of both national and external resources.

I. BACKGROUND

1. Since the General Assembly adopted its landmark resolution 44/211 of December 1989 on the operational activities of the United Nations system, there has been considerable use of and discussion about the term "programme approach", which is employed in the resolution, and the related term "programme-oriented mechanism". No universal agreement has been reached on the definition of those terms. There has been substantial variation in the meaning given to the terms by different authors; consequently, confusion and misunderstanding have often arisen.

2. UNDP has attempted to arrive at a common understanding of the term "programme approach" and to determine the essential elements of a "programme-oriented mechanism". It has involved its own staff, both at the field and headquarters levels, in this endeavour, as well as representatives of United Nations specialized agencies and of recipient and donor Governments. Two meetings were convened in the second half of 1991, in Santiago and in Geneva, to move the process forward.

3. A consolidated report of the two meetings was prepared: it has been made available as an informal paper to the Governing Council. The paper should be read, together with the present report, as a guide to current UNDP programming. The contents are indicative, not prescriptive: the issues raised will be subject to amendment in the light of experience.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPTS

4. To understand the essence of the programme approach, it is crucial to understand that the programme referred to is a national programme; i.e., it is not a UNDP programme nor that of any other outside partner. The approach is the way in which the national authorities attempt to achieve a national objective; not through a series of discrete or ad hoc projects, but through a carefully thought-out, articulated programme. The programme contains all the elements needed to reach and sustain the national objective. In short, the programme approach is a concept which applies primarily to national development: it can be pursued with no external involvement whatsoever. Therefore, it is not possible to speak of external partners following a programme approach unless such an approach has already been adopted by the national authorities.

5. The advantages of the programme approach are several:

(a) It recognizes the indispensable need to place national authorities (government or other) at the heart of the development effort, with a clear sense of commitment and direction;

(b) It recognizes the usually complex and often multisectoral nature of most development objectives;

(c) It takes into account aspects such as policy, legislation, manpower incentives, financial needs and other elements previously considered as external factors, which are essential for the successful attainment of a development objective;

(d) It recognizes the need for responsiveness and flexibility in the implementation of national programmes: it is virtually impossible to foresee and provide in advance for the varied and changing components of a national programme;

(e) It focuses on impact rather than on inputs or even outputs in the narrow sense.

III. EXTERNAL SUPPORT TO NATIONAL PROGRAMMES

6. The programme approach requires that attention be focused on a national development objective and that a coherent programme framework be formulated to reach that objective. All partners, national and external, thus find their direction and coordination within that framework. This approach does not exclude the possibility of concentrating on a component at the subprogramme level but it does require that the development objective be recognized and constantly borne in mind as the overarching justification for the subprogramme activities.

7. The programme approach underlines the need for frequent review of and flexible responses to unfolding events, not only within the component(s) of the programme but within the programme as a whole. In a real sense, there are no external factors: if the programme is to succeed, all the interrelated elements have to be considered. In addition, the programme approach, while concerned with outputs, focuses on their impact on the development objective. It is by the latter, above all, that the progress of programme implementation - including external contributions - is to be judged.

8. When external partners are invited to cooperate in development efforts, their cooperation should be consonant with national objectives. It may take place at various stages of the development process: policy formulation; programme formulation; programme implementation, including management; and evaluation. Wherever possible, external cooperation should support national programmes rather than isolated or ad hoc national development projects.

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR UNDP

9. Against this background, what are the implications for UNDP? They are several and they are fundamental. They are not necessarily new as concepts; however, their application may in most cases involve new elements.

10. UNDP-funded activities must be firmly and explicitly related to priority national development objectives, at the same time addressing the specific concerns of the Governing Council as contained in its decisions.

11. Notwithstanding the references to country programmes and development objectives in project documents, the majority of UNDP projects in the past have responded to specific challenges or problems at a subprogramme level. They have been designed primarily to meet immediate project objectives rather than to contribute to the attainment of a national development objective. They may have referred to so-called external factors but have seldom considered these factors as having direct relevance to the outcome of the project. There have been too many instances of projects fully attaining their immediate objectives yet having minimal or even no impact on the national development objective.

12. For some time, technical cooperation - including that of UNDP - has been criticized for being more concerned with the provision of and accountability for inputs than with the outputs which it helped to produce and the impact which these had on peoples' lives. While accountability for resources will need to be maintained, attention will be firmly fixed on impact if the programme approach is followed.

13. A further major criticism has been of a perceived unwillingness to adjust to changing circumstances. In fact, the regular review and monitoring of UNDP projects has permitted significant changes. Nonetheless, the need for responsiveness and flexibility in the implementation of development activities is undeniable and is the essence of the programme approach.

14. By placing the prime responsibility for national development squarely on the national authorities, the programme approach, if fully pursued, calls in effect for the national execution of UNDP-funded activities.

V. FORMULATION OF NATIONAL PROGRAMMES

15. Everything written so far assumes the existence of a national programme with which UNDP - or other donors - can cooperate. The reality, of course, is that coherent, articulated, national programmes often do not exist. As implied at the outset, this may be one of the basic explanations for the failures and disappointments of development efforts in the past. Well motivated and intentioned efforts have too often been undertaken in isolation: this is as true of the national perspective as it is of the external (donor) perspective.

16. The pursuit of the programme approach offers an important and exciting opportunity to UNDP, namely to help national authorities clarify their policies, translate them into national programmes, formulate comprehensive national programme frameworks and manage their implementation. The UNDP comparative advantages of universality as well as sectoral and policy neutrality - both deriving from its United Nations mandate - qualify it uniquely among donor partners to work closely with recipient countries in

these sensitive upstream areas. Moreover, by using its relatively modest resources in this way, UNDP can exploit its comparative advantages and at the same time promote aid mobilization and coordination through helping to bring into existence national programme frameworks which appear to be the best instrument for the purpose.

17. In all its interventions, UNDP must focus on building or strengthening the national capacity to function independently at the appropriate programme level.

VI. IMPLEMENTATION OF NATIONAL PROGRAMMES AND EXTERNAL SUPPORT

18. The scope and scale of UNDP cooperation vary from case to case, depending on the particular development endeavour as well as on the resources available. UNDP cooperation may be targeted at the national programme as a whole, at several components of it, or at one component. The form of UNDP involvement varies correspondingly. In most cases, for the next few years, UNDP cooperation will continue to be presented in a project document, modified in form - and certainly in content - to reflect the programme approach. Where UNDP support is sought at the programme rather than at the component level, the programme support mechanism may play an increasingly important role, initially on an experimental basis. The programme support mechanism in principle ensures that externally provided resources are available where they are most needed rather than being confined to a particular component of a programme. Work is under way on a format and procedures for the programme support mechanism.

19. Concern has been expressed that it will not be possible to discern the contribution of externally provided resources to the impact achieved since all resources are co-mingled and their impact will result from a number of interrelated components and activities. This is true and no conclusion has yet been reached on this cost/benefit concern. While the linkage between outputs and the cost of external inputs may be easier to determine in the conventional project, the direct linkage between the project output(s) and the achievement of a national goal may not always be clear or measurable.

20. In short, where external partners cooperate in the implementation of a national programme, it is inherently difficult to determine quantitatively what the contribution of each partner has achieved. Other, qualitative criteria and methods are necessary, based on effective and frequent monitoring, review and evaluation. At the same time, the importance of establishing success criteria and performance indicators for the national programme cannot be overemphasized.

VII. THE PROGRAMME APPROACH IN OPERATION

21. Guidelines will be issued in due course for cooperation in the formulation and management of national programmes; for the programme support mechanism; for a revised project document format; and for revised monitoring and evaluation procedures. However, it should be apparent from the preceding paragraphs that the pursuit of the programme approach need not wait for such advice. Indeed, a number of UNDP offices are already following the programme approach where the national authorities have adopted it.

22. In managing UNDP cooperation with partner countries, the emphasis must be on seeking to have a positive impact on peoples' lives (i.e., achieving human development) and on remaining responsive and flexible to the development situation as it evolves. Equal emphasis must be placed on establishing national capacity to sustain and carry forward the targeted national development objective.

23. There are a number of ways in which a country can start, on a systematic basis, to follow the programme approach. Some of them are given below.

24. Identification of national objectives:

(a) A policy dialogue with the national authorities;

(b) UNDP support for the national policy dialogue with special emphasis on building capacity for human development and the longer-term perspective;

(c) If not already clear, identification of the national development objectives which UNDP is supporting through its ongoing portfolio and which it will be supporting in the new cycle.

25. National programme formulation:

(a) Where a national programme framework does not exist, UNDP support may be requested to help to formulate one;

(b) In actual or potential areas of UNDP cooperation, identification (at least in diagrammatic form) of the main elements of eventual programmes, so that UNDP projects may be placed in their full and proper context;

(c) Special Programme Resources (SPR) funding to help the national authorities to formulate a specific programme framework (there is a subcategory for this purpose in the fifth cycle SPR).

26. National programme implementation and management:

(a) Ongoing and proposed UNDP projects are being reviewed and, where national programme frameworks exist, it is being ensured that UNDP-funded activities are:

(i) Situated within them, with clear and explicit vertical linkage to the national development objective;

(ii) Horizontally linked to all other essential programme elements, including policy and financial components;

(iii) Subject to national programme management, which is responsible for the attainment of the national objective as well as for the coordination of all programme elements and funding sources;

(b) Where national programme management is weak:

(i) UNDP support may be useful to set up an effective system and train personnel;

(ii) Performance indicators may be identified to determine the progress and impact of the national programme and, if possible, of the UNDP contribution to it. If no baseline data or performance indicators have been established for the national programme, UNDP support may be used for the purpose;

(iii) It should be ensured that UNDP-administered funds are used so as to be mutually reinforcing to the extent possible.

27. While the above list - which is by no means exhaustive - refers to UNDP, it should of course be understood that United Nations system partners are being involved in the shift to the programme approach, whenever possible and appropriate.

28. There is little that is conceptually new in the programme approach: with few exceptions, it has simply not been followed. If henceforth the programme approach is adopted by national authorities and supported by donor partners, there is every reason to believe that there will be a new focus and a new thrust to joint efforts with visibly positive consequences. Following a programme approach in a more systematic and coherent way should ensure that development efforts are more effective in reaching their objectives and that external cooperation contributes to the improved performance.